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USACE Takes Steps to Maintain Its Legacy in Iraq

By Mr. Vincent L. Marsh and Mr. Michael P. Scheck

The United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is passing on to the Iraqi people a legacy ensuring that the reconstruction effort continues under the supervision of highly qualified Iraqi engineers. The Gulf Region District (GRD) engineers are passing on more than just engineering techniques to their Iraqi counterparts, according to the GRD commander, who has acknowledged the reconstruction effort as comprehensive—fostering legitimacy, building capacity across institutions, promoting reconciliation, and enforcing reasonable quality and schedule construction standards. In thousands of projects, GRD imparted acceptable construction, design, and job site safety practices to Iraqi engineers.

An Enduring Presence

The U.S. forces in Iraq prepared for Operation New Dawn for some time as Soldiers began to redeploy, leaving only 50,000 troops in-theater by early fall 2010 and none there after 2011. As a result, USACE reviewed a number of contingencies for that end state. However, as all engineers know, time is a relative term when dealing with construction projects. The USACE GRD is the enduring Corps presence in Iraq, having been scaled back from a division and three districts during the past year. The district is currently working on options to deal with project completion tasks that will linger past the USACE end state in Iraq. One option USACE has been aggressively promoting is the hiring and training of local Iraqi engineers and support personnel.

The goal of the Iraqi associate hiring initiative, according to the GRD commander, is for Iraqi engineers to garner that engineering knowledge and pass it on to their counterparts in both the government and the private construction field. As Iraqis take control of restoring their infrastructure, the training and mentoring by GRD has yielded “phenomenal” results in such areas as technical knowledge, project management, and maintenance and operation of facilities.

Mission and Program Purpose

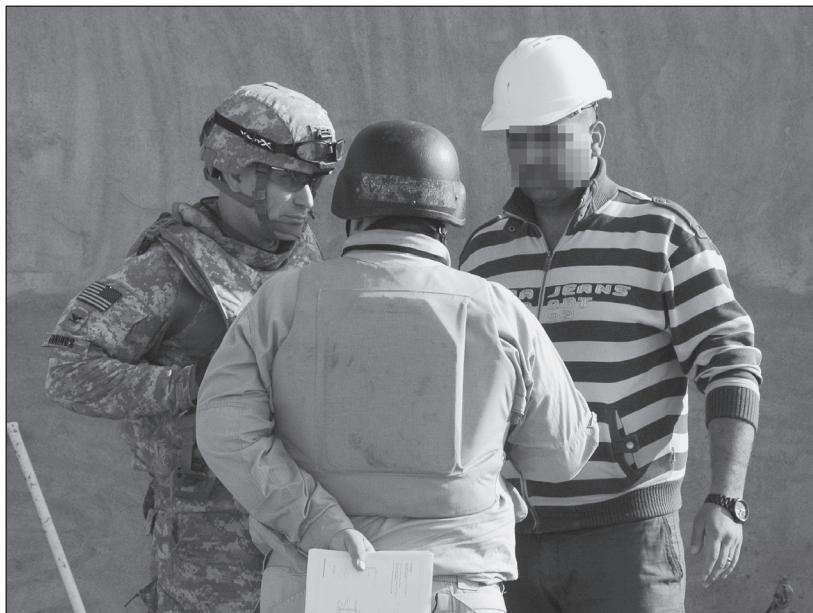
The USACE mission in Iraq is to help rebuild the infrastructure and improve the daily lives of the citizens.

Early on, USACE identified the need to use local national experts in engineering, safety, and construction quality assurance to help in this mission. Identifying the needs and specific skill sets for a locally hired workforce was the first step taken in a long, complex process. The next challenging step was to develop a robust local national capability that could both understand and enforce the International Building Code (IBC).

The purpose of the Iraqi Associate Program, according to the Program Management Plan, is to “develop the capacity of professional Iraqi engineers to independently perform construction management, engineering, and quality assurance functions.” The end result of the program will increase the institutional capacity of the Iraqi engineer field and aid in the development of the economy by allowing the Iraqi engineers to continue the reconstruction efforts initiated by their U.S. counterparts, according to the plan.

Bridging the Gap

Approximately 90 percent of the USACE projects are located in local communities far from U.S. military installations. These projects require engineers proficient in Arabic, engineering, and construction techniques to monitor their progress. These high-tech skills are currently in high demand and of limited supply in Iraq.



An Iraqi associate engineer acts as a liaison between the Gulf Region District commander and a contractor in Mosul, Iraq.

In order to ensure proper construction, USACE embarked on a mission to develop the technical capability of the Iraqi people that would enable them to interpret U.S. federal contracts and build projects to the IBC standard. This was accomplished by awarding a personal services contract that enabled USACE to bridge the gap that existed between effective contract oversight and insufficient oversight resources.

The personal services contract allowed USACE to obtain the Arabic-speaking professional engineers needed to execute its mission. This contract currently employs approximately 233 personnel who provide a broad range of skills ranging from administrative assistants, engineers, real estate specialists, senior media analysts, construction inspectors, and photojournalists. These professionals are embedded with USACE employees and learn the subtleties of the USACE mission and Project Management Business Process (PMBP) and the proper enforcement of contract terms, conditions, and specifications to build a high-quality project—on time and safely. In addition, Iraqi associates are relied on to interface with the local community, explain the project, and relay the community's concerns to USACE. This results in establishing the professionally capable workforce that builds a high-quality project and meets the needs of the Iraqi people.

Iraqi Associates

The \$10 million Iraqi Associate Program is funded through the United States State Department Economic Support Fund. The capacity development program also includes an Iraqi engineer enhancement program that affords engineers—from the various ministries, university faculties, and small businesses—three- to six-month fellowships in public-, academic-, and private-sector engineering environments in the United States. To sustain the Iraqi associate partnership, the State Department has provided \$45 million from the Economic Support Fund to select Iraqi academic institutions to develop curriculum and training to meet provincial government of Iraq requirements. The training program for USACE Iraqi associates includes one month of formal training, an internship, a qualification transition—where candidates convert from an Iraqi associate-funded position to a project-funded position—and follow-up continuing education workshops and webinars.

These Iraqi associates provide a vital link in the USACE construction network. At the GRD Southern Area Office, a large team of Iraqi engineers, serving side by side with USACE employees, have performed extraordinarily in all construction aspects, and their expertise and abilities have been instrumental in the successful completion of area projects. Out of nearly two dozen Iraqi engineers currently employed in the resident office, three of them work as project engineers and carry through projects with little or no supervision from U.S. engineers. Training is primarily on the job, working side by side with a project engineer—and as they learn, trainees are slowly moved up in responsibility.

Other Iraqi associates work as quality assurance (QA) representatives in the field—preparing daily reports, monitoring safety, reviewing design drawings, and ensuring that quality is maintained at the project site; the standout QA representatives are often groomed for project engineer positions. All associates attend the safety office training and are constantly reminded of the importance of safety at the job site. Other classes have included ethics training and construction management practices. The only drawback is that the best associates leave the associate program and go to the United States.

The GRD resident offices in the south have been taking the lead in hiring, training, and integrating Iraqi associates. One officer sees the key to a successful program as focusing on education and training and hires only engineering-degree candidates, who begin early on both formal and informal training and are able to attain QA certificates of training and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety officer certification. Online training and websites (such as www.construction-knowledge.net) help familiarize associates with U.S. construction techniques.

At the outset, offices in the south recognized the importance of the Iraqi Associate Program—and as the project load got smaller, the offices began to rely more heavily on the Iraqi associates to get to job sites that are too far or take too long for U.S. personnel to visit. As projects are completed and the work force scaled back, there has been much success in placing well-qualified Iraqi engineers in other positions due to the demand for their exceptional project management skills.

Partnership and Legacy

USACE has completed thousands of reconstruction projects in Iraq in partnership with the United States government and the government of Iraq. Since 2004, USACE has completed 5,257 projects throughout Iraq, valued at more than \$9.1 billion, and has more than 250 projects ongoing. The overall reconstruction effort in Iraq currently provides jobs for more than 20,000 Iraqis. USACE recognizes that its projects are in good hands under the management of the Iraqi associates. A legacy of improved safety and QA methods will be left in Iraq, and the sheer volume of projects has developed a pool of qualified contractors and inspectors who have seen what a difference a well-executed QA program can make.

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